The boundaries of the adjacent possible, or what can we ask of an olive tree?

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Learn2Change. The name of the network and the corresponding title of this book offer a good starting point for asking many questions. How might we learn to change? Change what or whom? And for what? The potential answers to these questions seem to largely depend (among other things) on how we imagine who we are, where we are now, how we got here, where we are going and where (we think) we may want or need to be. They also require us to think about our relationship to change and to the role that knowledge plays in fostering change. While all kinds of involuntary change happen all the time, personal change (in attitudes, perceptions, sensibilities, behaviours, desires, imaginaries…) is often seen as something that we can (hope to) *engineer* using different tools and methods of educational/pedagogical engagement. As we (modern, Cartesian subjects)[1] have been socialized into believing that we are rational, autonomous, individual agents, knowledge has come to be seen as the indispensable and pivotal instrument for change.

A dominant theory of how change works proposes that an input of more and better knowledge leads to a change in personal beliefs/knowledge systems. This, in turn, leads to a change in attitudes and dispositions which influences how we make decisions, which ultimately translates into changes in our behaviour and actions. We may agree/identify or disagree/misidentify with this proposition, but in both cases most of our educational efforts remain – consciously or subconsciously, tied, at least to some extent, to this theory. Anyone that has ever tried to kick an undesirable habit or any kind of physical and non-physical addiction, would likely agree that simply more knowledge about how personally and socially damaging these things may be, has

very little, if any influence on changing our dispositions towards them, let alone changing our behaviour. Some sort of a crisis, rather than knowledge, seems to be a much more likely candidate for inducing deep and potentially lasting change. The neurochemical pathways that get wired in our neural networks through habits and addictions cannot simply be rationalized/thought off away. We literally embody/inhabit them. Changing them means also changing our bodies, not just our minds.

Although problematic addictions and habits are often seen as personal, individual issues, there is a very long list of those that we, as collective entities (societies, cultures, global economies, shared humanity), developed over time. Once collectivized they are usually not seen as addictions, habits, beliefs, but as normalized ways in which we exist, interpret and relate to the world. Thus, for most of our everyday existence we repeatedly mistake our construction of reality and the experience of that construction for reality itself. In order to maintain the coherence of our constructions we tend to seek company and to identify with people and groups whose worldviews are close to ours, while tending to dismiss and ignore those whose worldviews we find challenging, unreasonable, non-realistic or simply false.

Usually this desire for developing a coherent, consensus-based worldview is referred to as the notion of universal reason. The notion assumes that through evidence-based arguments and dialogue, humans can (and will) reach consensus about the universal and fundamental laws of nature and society (universal rights and freedoms) and that such laws are – at least in principle, discoverable. The implication of these dispositions is that, if we all think really hard, we will ultimately learn to see the world in the same way. Then, once we agree on the kind of world there is and on the kind of world we want, all we would need to do is to bring this new (better) world to life. In other words, once we agree on common knowledge (shared epistemology) the only problems we would need to solve are essentially methodological. There are several problems with this notion, of which only three will be mentioned in this text and only one examined in more detail. The first and most obvious one is that we would never all agree neither on a shared description, nor on a shared vision for the world, as its inexhaustible complexity (be it bio-physical or socio-cultural) and dynamic nature will continue to resist any attempt at such gross reductionism[2]. The second is the psychoanalytical insight that something that is fundamentally a

desire or a fantasy (driven by drives often unknown to us) gets to be conflated with what we have learned to call reason or rationality[3]. The third, and this is a very important one, is that the creation of exclusive frames of what we call rationality, reasonable behaviour and/or reasonable thinking, is severely restricting our possibilities to imagine, think and exist differently[4].

This particular kind of constrained thinking/rationality that draws its roots from the project of European Enlightenment is referred to by Sousa Santos[5] as "abyssal thinking". Arguably the main crux of abyssal thinking is that it can imagine only one particular way of being (originating in modern, Western, (secular) Enlightenment-based ontology) as a legitimate source of its knowledges (epistemologies). These knowledges can then be operationalized in different ways – they can develop many methodologies, but ultimately the source and the structure of knowledge production is reduced to one single legitimate, valid and intelligible option.
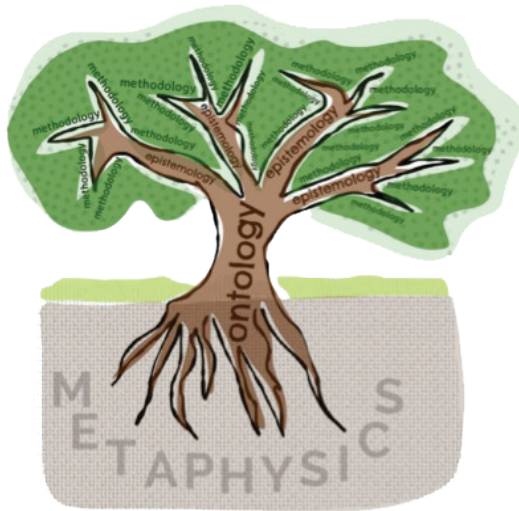
Andreotti et al.[6] attempt to represent abyssal thinking through the figure of the olive tree. In this figure the trunk and the roots of the tree represent a single ontology (way of being), grounded in the soil of metaphysics (reality – as both existing and insisting), from which many different knowledges (epistemologies) branch out with even more different methodologies (countless leaves). However, as these different branches (epistemologies) all come from the same trunk and roots, they can only always (re)produce the same kind

of fruit (olives). There may be different variations of olives, but the tree cannot produce other kinds of fruit – figs, pears, or apples for instance.

In the last decade or so a new concept, borrowed from the work of theoretical biologist and complex systems theorist Stuart Kauffman[7] has begun to find its home in various theories of social change, most notably in the works of Roberto Mangabeira Unger[8]. It is the concept of the "adjacent possible" that – in its societal adaptation, refers to notions of alternatives that are viable, but unimaginable within the currently existing modes of thinking. Although promising, and long awaited in its wake-up call, Unger's work can be used as an example of how the awareness of and indeed, deep reflection on the limits of our thinking and being, does not necessarily or automatically translate into propositions for *ontologically* different solutions.

In brief, Unger[9] argues that we need to radically expand our imaginative possibilities for institutional/structural systemic changes, if we are to have any hope for developing more egalitarian, inclusive and democratic societies. Since, according to him, the three main political and economic projects of the 18th and 19th century Enlightenment, capitalism, socialism and representative democracy (all very important branches of the olive tree) have failed to deliver on their promises of creating societies that would enable everyone under equal conditions the access to means to realize their full human potential. Unger calls for a need for radical experimentation with different forms of social organization and integration. He proposes[10] a "high-energy democracy", in which changes to social, political and economic institutions can happen quickly and where many different types of social, political and economic organisation are able to co-exist. However, as his proposition still focuses on personal realization through (meaningful) work and consumption, it could be interpreted as suggesting a development of a new branch of the tree, but that that branch should be expected to produce the same kind of fruit as before (olives).

In recent years countless alternative movements have sprung to life in response to different aspects of social, economic, political and ecological crises and many of them see themselves and/or are seen by others as radical, revolutionary and/or innovative. It would be interesting to explore, what types of critique, what horizons of hope and what kind of imaginaries of existence are articulated in these various movements, in particular in those that could

be arguably seen as the most aware of some of the irresolvable contradictions of modern societies, such as the degrowth and the transition movements. The awareness of planetary boundaries and limits to growth is clearly visible in both of these movements, but to what extent do their propositions challenge or affirm the fundamental tenets of modern societies such as the single story of progress, development and human evolution[11], the mediating role of nation states and its legal systems, the dependency on international markets and hierarchical, exploitative, gendered and racialized international divisions of labour? To what extent do they address not just questions related to constitutive social, economic and environmental violence and injustices, but also to cognitive, affective and relational injustices?[12] It would be also interesting to see in what ways do their horizons and imaginaries overlap or diverge from other initiatives that claim different ontological roots, such as Buen Vivir or Ubuntu?

I do not wish to suggest that there should be some kind of a checklist for initiatives of social change to tick off, in order to deserve a badge of being *genuinely different* for two main reasons. First, it seems that is perhaps impossible to challenge all of modernity's ontological premises at the same time as they are constitutive of what we consider to be 'us'[13]. Second, similar to a process of trying to overcome an addiction, this process is not so much subject to rational decision making, as it is subject to developing the courage and stamina for being open to being interpolated by the world in ways that interrupt our treasured ontological securities and that remove the orientation markers that help us navigate in the world.

Very likely the same considerations and concerns apply to those of us, involved in (global) education. We often look at these initiatives as sources of inspiration and hope. If we are interested in exploring pedagogical practices that would help us develop the necessary courage, stamina and discernment required for such openings to emerge, then we need to considerably re-imagine and re-conceptualize our dominant theories of change and the way we see the role of knowledge in terms of fostering (deep) change. In contrast to prevailing approaches in education, this would entail going beyond the need for more and better information (the banking model of education), beyond (merely) critical reflection (critical pedagogy) and also beyond essentializing attempts at plurality and inclusion where other knowledges and ways of being remain always precisely just that – other. As all of these approaches

operate predominantly, if not exclusively, in the rational/cognitive domain, they cannot offer pathways of engagement with desires, projections and attachments that are beyond rational control. They can however, show us the limits of our rational capabilities. While I would find it difficult to suggest any specific models to look up to, I do believe that an exploration and experimentation with pedagogical (and other) practices that engage with our affective and relational dimensions through embodied, experiential and other kinds of more-than-merely-cognitive work offer us a much better chance at creating conditions for some of that stamina and courage to emerge.

Moving towards pedagogies that might have the potential of nurturing deep change requires from us that we begin to develop a different relationship with knowledge, both with what (we think) we know and do not know, but also with what we cannot know – with what lies beyond the socially and historically inherited ontological framework of what makes sense to us. It is however questionable, whether we are already in a position where we really want and dare to that. Given our very strong attachment to relating to the world and each other through meaning and knowledge production, it may very well be, that while the tree of singular ontology is still alive the only thing we can do, is to keep growing new branches. Genuinely new possibilities will perhaps only become legible, once the composting tree becomes the substrate for new trees (or other plants) to emerge.

Meanwhile, in the south of Italy, more than a million olive trees are estimated to be dying, presumably from *xylella fastidiosa*, a bacterial disease for which there is no cure. Entire regions are devastated, because olive trees were pretty much the only trees that grew there for hundreds of years. Perhaps they will be replaced with a different monoculture of figs, dates or almonds? Or perhaps, after some time, a forest might again grow there…

Notes

1. The term Cartesian subject is related to the work of French philosopher Rene Descartes — Cartesius (1596–1650), whose metaphysical assumptions (I think, therefore I am — Cogito ergo sum) and rationalist philosophy (the idea of universal reason, addressed in the paper) are widely considered as foundational to modern ways of being and knowing.
2. Stuart Kauffman. 2008. *Reinventing the Sacred. A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion,* New York: Basic Books.

3. Slavoj Zizek. 2000. "The Cartesian subject without the Cartesian theatre." *The subject of Lacan: A Lacanian reader for psychologists,* edited by Kareen Ror Malone and Stephen R. Friedlander. New York: SUNY Press. Pp. 23–40.
4. Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti. 2016b. "Re-imagining education as an uncoercive rearrangement of desires" in *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 5 (1): 79–88.
5. Boaventura de Sousa Santos. 2007. "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges" in Review (Fernand Braudel Center) XXX(1): 45–89.
6. Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, Sharon Stein, Ali Sutherland, Rene Suša, Sara Amsler and Karen Pashby. 2018. "Mobilizing different conversations about global justice in education: Toward alternative futures in uncertain times." Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review. (in press). Draft version available at <https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/cartographies-text/>, Accessed February 16, 2018.
7. Stuart Kauffman. [1995], 2008. *At Home in the Universe. The Search for the Laws of Self-Organisation and Complexity.* New York: Oxford University Press.
8. Roberto Mangabeira Unger. 2009. *The Left Alternative*. New York: Verso.
——. Religion of the Future. 2014. New York: Verso, 2014.
9. Unger, 2009.
10. Ibid., p. 29.
11. Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti. 2016a. "Multi-layered Selves: Colonialism, Decolonization and Counter-Intuitive Learning Spaces", <http://artseverywhere.ca/2016/10/12/multi-layered-selves/>, Accessed January 12, 2018.
12. EarthCARE network. 2017. "EarthCARE Global Justice Framework", <https://blogs.ubc.ca/earthcare/framework/>, Accessed January 12, 2018.
13. Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti. 2012. "HEADS UP: editor's preface", *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices,* 6(1): 3–5.

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Rene Suša is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His work explores the hidden ideas, ideals and desires that drive modern global imaginaries. He is interested in exploring educational pathways that might help us re-orient some of these desires and create openings for different (unimaginable) futures. Rene is also part of the EarthCARE educational network.